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## **Kurzbeiträge / Reports**

Henning Melber

### **China in Africa: A new partner or another imperialist power?**

The offensive pursued by China into Africa has provoked a vibrant debate over the intentions and effects of what has been termed ‘a new scramble’ (which should not be mistaken for a simple copy of the old one; cf. Southall/Melber 2009). In this accelerated global competition for resources (in which not only China is a new competitor) Africa has emerged, in the view of many, as ‘a vital arena of strategic and geopolitical competition’ and ‘the final frontier’ (Klare/Volman 2006: 297). This constellation has resulted in a growing number of analyses dealing with China in Africa (cf. Taylor 2007 and Mohan 2008). As this debate illustrates, the trend continues. Interestingly, the current controversies around the EU trade policy as manifested in the EPAs (cf. Kohnert 2008), the concerns over the US-American led further military control over the continent (AFRICOM) as well as the experiences with the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) feature much less prominently. While dealings with China initially have largely been guided by scepticism, if not open criticism, such one-dimensional perception tends to neglect other socio-economic imbalances and power structures.

Recently, more and more differentiated, or even mildly positive contributions, have been published, seeking to present a less negative assessment of the Chinese engagement. Maxi Schoeman’s contribution in this issue is but one of these attempts to do justice to the new power unfolding. She

- a) argues against a polarised view, which would force Africans to make an either-or choice between the old and new relations;
- b) considers China’s involvement as a likely opportunity for an African ‘take off’ and
- c) suggests that the new ties might be a challenge and opportunity for all three regions (Africa, China, and Europe).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> She is, of course, aware that these three categories are somewhat general abstractions which in the further course of fine-tuning would need to be replaced by more nuanced and differentiated analyses based on empirical realities on the ground. In the absence of hitherto

In contrast, the complementary view presented in this article warns against too much optimism and 'wishful thinking'. While it is indeed pre-mature to draw any final conclusions, evidence seems to suggest that a cautious view is justified.

### China's (not so) new role

Trade between China and Africa reproduces a classical skewed pattern: raw materials on the one side (Africa), in exchange for (value-added) manufactured products on the other side (China). The global trade and exchange patterns have, despite new actors, not displayed any meaningful qualitative structural changes. Chinese trade and investment in African countries is not significantly different from other patterns. They will not transform the structure of production nor make for a new international division of labour: 'Indeed, such trade can only perpetuate the dependence of developing countries on exports of primary commodities' (Nayyar 2008: 17). In 2006 oil and gas accounted for 62 % of Africa's exports to China. Non-petroleum minerals and metals ranked second (13 %) on the export list. In contrast, Africa imports mainly manufactured products from China (45 %), as well as machinery and transport equipment (31 %) and weaponry: China is among the top suppliers of arms to African customers.<sup>2</sup> The trends suggest that China is in the meantime 'a trade-driven industrial power integrated into the world system', which 'increasingly replicates in key ways longstanding developed-state policies' (Sautman/Hairong 2007: 77 and 78).

While African governments often welcome the new partners in business, there are growing local resentments towards China's 'constructive engagement' (Corkin/Burke 2008). It manifests itself in a wide-ranging panorama of, at times gigantic, infrastructural projects from public buildings to roads, railways, harbours, and dams (cf. Brewer 2008). Chinese companies and their workforce (which is often imported too and kept apart in separate compounds) are perceived as unwanted competition and a threat. Chinese bidders compete successfully with local building industries and are accused of ignoring the labour laws and safety measures at the workplace. The same is said of Chinese mining companies, for example, in Zambia's copperbelt. The Chinese presence also affects negatively the local survival strategies of

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sufficient case studies, however, and for the purpose of this debate, they seem to be an acceptable albeit provisional level of operationalisation.

2 This was illustrated in spectacular fashion during May 2008 by what has been dubbed the 'ship of shame', which sought to deliver military equipment to the ZANU-PF securocrats under siege in Zimbabwe and provoked boycott actions from the dock workers in the harbour towns of Maputo, Durban, Walvis Bay, and Luanda, who all refused to unload the freight.

people without salaried employment battling to make a living. This includes a hitherto unknown competition for hawkers and street vendors, who suffer from the effects of cheap imported goods sold in Chinese shops or even on the pavements at prices they cannot offer. Local retail shops are similarly worried, as is the local textile industry in several countries.

A Chinese public relations exercise at the World Social Forum (WSF) in Nairobi at the end of January 2007 (in the Chinese-built sports arena on the outskirts of the capital) sought to underline the country's long-standing solidarity with African partners, which plays an important role in the current imaginary (cf. Alden/Alves 2008). Instead, it provoked an outburst of anger by social movement activists from a variety of countries. They accused the Chinese of bailing out despotic and authoritarian regimes under pressure through their economic deals and claimed China was worse than the old colonial and imperialist powers. While the latter used forms of exploitation based on cheap local labour, the Chinese were accused of generating extra profits even at the expense of the small traders and unskilled workers by victimising them through the new competition, which has robbed them of their last source of monetary income (cf. Bello 2007 and my own observations as a participant). A volume by African scholars and activists launched at the same WSF testifies further to the, at best, mixed reactions to the newly emerging constellation (cf. Manji/Marks 2007).

The Chinese government and its affiliated agencies seem to lack experience when it comes to such confrontations. They are not used to autonomous civil society actors openly challenging established state practices and promoting alternative agendas. This is a marked difference to the competitors from Europe and North America. Their political systems allow an arena for voicing protest and provide space for social and political forces which also enter into anti-government alliances with partners in the southern hemisphere. At the WSF, Northern NGOs organised protest campaigns together with Southern NGOs on a variety of issues such as the EPAs, climate change, or the effects of neo-liberal privatisation of public goods. This vital difference to a country like China, which keeps its political culture under tight control and allows no dissenting voices to campaign, contributes at times to a more nuanced and differentiated perception in the global South when it comes to actors from the North.

This does not mean that the social movement activists criticising Beijing's policy and the Chinese expansion into African societies are less critical of Western imperialism (see also Guerrero/Manji 2008). For many among them and numerous other people on the ground, it is rather the choice between the pest and the cholera, as a critical Gabonese observer stated provocatively (Legault 2008: 42). But China remains the less known, un-personal factor since there is a lack of interaction with like-minded Chinese, who would through such alliances and concrete forms of support deconstruct the

'unknown' perceived as a threat. In Togo, reference among textile producers and traders is made to the 'Chinese devils', which according to Sylvanus (2008) epitomises the transformation of everyday lives under conditions of neo-liberalism. Similar frustrations are evident elsewhere. In many countries the anti-Chinese sentiments on the ground are tantamount to aggressive racism.

### The impact on continental policies

Obviously, the current increase in the number of external players is strengthening not only the economic but also the political bargaining role of African governments. This is not negative for the people. But it serves them only if the elites support the public interest and are willing to create investment and exchange patterns which provide benefits for the majority. The chances for such a redefinition of the agenda are not great. A report based on six case studies observed

'that the government, particularly the executive, in many cases in Africa is comprised of a political elite whose reality is very much removed from the rest of the population. This results in policy-makers and influential opinion-leaders crafting policy approaches that are not beneficial to the more impoverished sectors of the population' (Centre for Chinese Studies 2007: viii).

Potentially alternative choices – like new deals with China – do not necessarily improve governance. Chinese foreign policy is attractive for autocratic leaders and oligarchies still in power over societies which are run like the private property of cliques. Guided by its gospel of non-intervention, China provides grants and loans to kleptocracies with dubious human rights records and is not petty-minded when it comes to the funding modalities (Henderson 2008: 12-13). Not surprisingly, transparency and accountability are not among the core values cultivated in African-Chinese links, and Beijing's notion of human rights is at best dubious (Taylor 2008) – although one should not forget that the West has also not been a role model in rigorously pursuing concerns over human rights violations, despite claiming to be committed to the noble cause (Breslin/Taylor 2008).

For current 'risk investments' by Chinese enterprises, however, more is at stake than merely securing access to new markets and resources. Once it is a part of the game, 'China seeks, as do all investors, a stable and secure investment environment' (Mohan/Power 2008: 37). Chinese foreign policy seems indeed to be adapting. Leaving behind the earlier fundamentals,

'China has moved from outright obstructionism and a defensive insistence on solidarity with the developing world to an attempt at balancing its material needs with its acknowledged responsibilities as a major power' (Kleine-Ahlbrandt/Small 2008: 56).

Since the beginning of the century, Beijing, through its role in United Nations peacekeeping operations, has turned into an active contributor to conflict resolution efforts (cf. He 2007).

Institutional quality and sound economic policies, however, remain the ultimate domestic ingredients for a development paradigm benefiting the majority of people. The unchanged nature of the current economic relations does not encourage such governance changes:

‘In settings where initial political and economic institutions are relatively weak, dependence on primary commodities, especially natural resources such as oil, appears to have encouraged predatory government behaviour and rent-seeking, deterring the development of stable, democratic institutions that are conducive to growth’ (Jerome/Wohlmuth 2007: 201).

Governing the access to resources through appropriate rent and revenue management policies as well as by improving policy design and implementation are as important as a diversification of the economy and the creation of human and social capital (Wohlmuth 2007: 11 f.).

In the light of the new scramble, the question is not so much a choice between Europe, the USA, and China (or any other actors interested in the African resources). The challenge lies in setting a new course to make optimal use of the new scenario for the majority of the people on the continent. As Amosu (2007) concludes, in a variation of the African proverb which says when elephants are fighting the grass is suffering: ‘Don’t focus so much on the elephants. The future of Africa lies with the grass.’ This draws attention again to those who have always been at the receiving end of the unequal relationships, namely the majority of people in the African societies. Their agency is crucial, and their interests should matter more than those of any others. This also points in a direction which should seek to shift focus beyond a reduced Sino-African dichotomy termed as a reductionist ‘dragon in the bush’ perspective (Large 2008). As summarised by Habib, there remain great dangers in the current competitive constellation:

‘It demonstrates that all of the countries in the scramble are driven largely by national interests, and that their behaviour is conditioned far more by competition with each other than by the noble sentiments enshrined in their policy documents and press releases’ Habib (2008: 274).

This echoes similar concerns expressed in an earlier report for the Development Committee of the European Parliament. It concludes that the major external actors operating in Africa

‘are wary that their urgent domestic needs will be compromised if they distance themselves of their own opportunistic and self-centred policies. Short-term gains still prevail over long-term stability’ (Holslag et. al. 2007: 50).

To neutralise this 'destructive development', the authors identify a need for 'a comprehensive and open dialogue between Africa and all its partners' (ibid.; see also Holslag 2007). In that logic, there is indeed another task, namely, the crafting of an African response to China, as identified by le Pere (2008: 34-36). The priorities he lists are

- 1) a need to overcome the 'yellow peril' stereotype;
- 2) African involvement in the harmonisation of bi- and multilateral donor activities on the continent;
- 3) the need to urge China to participate in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI);
- 4) the need for African governments to improve their regulatory frameworks and policies; and
- 5) the establishment of a high-level continental coordinating body to guide and implement the Chinese-African cooperation agenda.

Such steps would at least contribute towards an African China policy. When articulating such a demand, however, one should also be aware that there has so far not been any truly coherent African policy on other matters given the variety of political regimes and interests on the continent.

### Which development?

China has also developed into a major donor that others react to (see Goldstein et al. 2006, Tjønneland et. al. 2006, and Davies 2007). China plays an increasingly active role as a provider of mainly bilateral support (cf. Davies et al. 2008). While Beijing is careful not to call it aid, this clearly corresponds to Western development assistance. Agreements are often based on loans for the implementation of a wide range of mainly infrastructural projects, which at the same time provide know-how, equipment, and labour for the financed work. There are concerns that China's lending strategy might lead to another debt trap and new forms of dependency. These concerns have in one assessment been considered as unjustified (Reisen/Ndoye 2008), while another saw a reason to demand established internationally recognised legal standards for responsible lending (Huse/Muyakwa 2008).

Several 'fundamentals' of the current aid paradigm and policies are under scrutiny when considering the Chinese engagement. These include the following:

- the role played by multilateral versus bilateral relations among states;
- the balance between collective responsibility and national sovereignty;
- the prominence and preference given to either 'hard' (infrastructural) or 'soft' (good governance and institutional capacity-building) priorities.

These areas touch upon earlier debates dating back to the days of the 'developmental state' policy of the 1970s. The official notion propagated then (largely by governments accountable mainly to themselves) demanded development first, human rights and democracy later. Maxi Schoeman seems to be at least partly in favour of such an approach when she invokes the saying that one cannot eat democracy. This view contrasts with the understanding that there is no sustainable development without institutionalised democratic norms and the entrenchment of human rights and their corresponding values. After all, one cannot eat authoritarian rule either, and as the democracy movement in African countries since the late 1980s has shown, people would at least like to have the right to say that they are hungry.

It remains to be seen whether the proponents of the two views can find a way to shift towards convergence of the priorities in one coherent framework that gives sufficient recognition and space for the implementation of both democracy and development for the benefit of a majority of the people. In a stock-taking exercise, Thorborg concludes,

'if China is prepared to encourage more multi-laterality and if African states through the AU can work out common strategies a more equal and win-win relationship could ensue' (Thorborg 2008: 14).

Many also share the hope that the different major global players can find sufficient common ground to act within the defined framework 'of a multi-polar world emerging in a multilateral form, rather than in the shape of two or more hostile camps' (Grant/Barysch 2008: 104). This corresponds with expectations articulated not only by Maxi Schoeman but also in other preliminary assessments. Ampiah and Naidu (2008: 338) support a related forward-looking approach, stressing the need for recognition of an 'enlightened selfishness' as the guiding principle for an evolving partnership to bring about the maximum good for Africa's people. There seems to be evidence that the new players on the continent might indeed provide additional windows of opportunity (McCormick 2008). In the absence of some comforting concrete evidence this view might be a knee-jerk response to earlier more negative perceptions – a kind of positive 'wishful thinking'. What most authors agree upon at this stage is the urgent need for more elaborate and empirically sound studies which investigate the realities within countries much more rigorously before drawing general conclusions.

China signed the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness adopted on 2 March 2005. This committed it to the principles of ownership of recipients, alignment of aid to national priorities, and harmonisation and coherence among donor countries. It is not clear, however, whether China signed up in its capacity as a recipient rather than as a donor country (Davies 2007: 13). The Accra Agenda for Action, endorsed on 4 September 2008 by ministers of developing and donor countries and heads of multi- and bi-lateral development institu-



tions attending the 3<sup>rd</sup> High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness stressed that 'all development actors will work in more inclusive partnerships'. This signals the intent to find a common denominator – but in whose interest?

Considered as a successful developing country in the era of current globalisation, China has called its own programme of socio-economic transformation and reform *Gai Ge Kai Feng*, meaning 'change the system, open the door'. This includes the privatisation of large parts of the ownership in the economy, the liberalisation of trade and investment, and the development of high-quality infrastructure guided by market principles (cf. Dollar 2008). This, after all, sounds not too different from the Western development discourse. It is nevertheless questionable as to whether this is good news for Africa. For Guttal (2008: 34) 'China's current aid and foreign investment practices have begun to dangerously resemble colonialism'. There are similar concerned and critical voices that are more reluctant than others to argue for a welcoming embrace to a new global player, which after all might not change the rules of the game but simply join the hegemonic club and dance to its tune. Their fear is that China in the end might merely offer more of the same instead of being a true alternative.

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